

FRENCH INDO-CHINA

To the important though negative handicap of infrequent contacts may be added the most ominous of all forms of Oriental-Occidental misunderstanding—the white man's assumption of superiority. Almost inevitably this feeling settles over the Occidental, no matter how liberal his viewpoint may have been in his own country. Idealistic young Frenchmen have come to the colony longing to play Cyrano to the oppressed natives, brutalized by his compatriots. He is often disillusioned upon arrival. Old colonials tell him condescendingly that he will outgrow such notions, or he may have an experience that confirms their worst prophecies. Try as he would, Jules Boissiere could find no profoundly learned and disdainful bonze who would instruct in the secrets of the East one benighted Occidental who burned to drink of his wisdom. In addition to the discouragement afforded by a difficult language and a profoundly different culture, it was even more disillusioning not to find a qualified teacher, and to feel that all one had amassed is but arid and banal. If further study proves Annamite civilization rewarding, almost all scholars agree that they are at first disappointed by its dull mediocrity. The totally inaccurate and romanticized cult of exoticism that prevails in France is largely responsible for these early disillusionment[^]. The amount of perseverance and discipline required to master even the technique for understanding the East has given birth to the legend of Asiatic impenetrability. This is the solution encouraged not only by laziness but by the attraction which the very mystery of the East has exercised over the Western mind. Understanding Ask would probably lessen its charm for Europe, The obstacles to penetrating Eastern thought are real enough without

deliberately swathing it in thicker veils. The Orient does nothing to further Western understanding, but even opposes it by the force of inertia and ridicule.

For the few who are disappointed, there are the many more who are immediately ripe for that state of mind known as the *esprit colm*. This unhappy attitude is an aggressive composite of smugness, laziness*, fear, prejudice. Though colonial society is less class-bourn! In France, it is an aristocracy in its relations to the natives, a return, to ifee feudal regime. According to this philosophy the most man is above the best native. This attitude is further *by the average native acceptance of inferiority*. They 'Europeans* presence in the colony only in terms of the tettters leadei^sbip. When the European treats the Annamifce as an tetter by treeing die European as an inferior. Under Qraimstances, the cbroopion of egalitarian principles feels his